Jamestown, Cradle of U.S. Democracy, Celebrates 400th Anniversary

By LAUREN MONSEN

Colonial settlers forged representative government in the New World.

Although Virginia's Jamestown settlement—the first permanent English settlement in the New World—was launched in 1607 as a commercial venture by London shareholders, it quickly evolved into the English New World's first laboratory for representative government.

Jamestown, which is celebrating its 400th anniversary in 2007 with 18 months of events and commemorations, is regarded as the cradle of U.S. democracy by many historians. However, scholar Warren Billings points out that this was not what the settlement's founders originally had in mind.

The colonists did not intend "to create a legislature as we know it," says Billings. In fact, Virginia's General Assembly was created in 1619 as a response to the rapid growth of population and economic activity throughout Virginia. That growth, he said, made it difficult for investors in England to administer the settlement's affairs, so the General Assembly emerged as "an adjunct management device for the Virginia Company of London" shareholders.

"It was never the intent for the Assembly to be modeled on a parliament. That came later," says Billings, who is distinguished professor emeritus in the University of New Orleans history department and the author of books on early 17th-century Virginia and Jamestown.

At first, the Assembly met as a unicameral body, comprised of Virginia's governor, members of his advisory council, and elected representatives known as burgesses. But in 1624, the English crown seized the Virginia Company of London's charter and declared Virginia a royal colony. The crown "left the settlers pretty much to themselves," Billings notes. "The Assembly continued to meet over the next decade or so, as a unicameral body."

Sir William Berkeley's appointment as royal governor of Virginia in 1642 proved to be the impetus that steered the General Assembly

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Courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historical Park

Above: The Godspeed, a replica of one of the three ships that brought English settlers to America in 1607, sails past the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor in June 2006, beginning commemorations of the founding of Jamestown.

Left: This painting by **Keith Rocco** *depicts the home of a tailor in Jamestown.*

Above left: One of the commemorative coins issued by the U.S. Mint to honor the Jamestown anniversary.

These paintings by **Sidney King** *for the National Park Service are part of a series telling the story of the founding of the Jamestown settlement, its hardships, successes and failures in the early 17th century. These paintings, and others by* **Keith Rocco**, *are displayed at the Colonial National Historical Park in Jamestown, Virginia, where self-guided walking and car tours explain how the settlers lived.*

Colonists came ashore in 1607 on an island connected by a narrow isthmus to the mainland. They named their new home after King James I of England.

Jamestown in 1614. Besides the fort and houses, the settlers set up pottery, brick production, silk and wine making, ice harvesting and copper industries.

Second State house and outbuildings in the new town. Jamestown remained an important community as the capital of Virginia for 92 years.

toward a more parliamentary configuration. Berkeley encouraged the burgesses to hold their sessions independently of his advisory council, and before long the separation became formal. In this manner, the Assembly evolved into a bicameral legislature, with the burgesses functioning much like the English Parliament's House of Commons, and the governor's advisory council, or upper chamber, patterning itself after the House of Lords.

While the election of burgesses continued the English tradition of electing members of Parliament, certain colonial innovations marked the beginnings of a uniquely American democratic framework. "The tying of representation to specific areas and numbers of voters" in Virginia was a departure from the English model, says Billings. Increasingly, Virginian burgesses were elected from their own home districts, "so direct representation began to take hold in Virginia in the 17th century," he says.

An incident known as Bacon's Rebellion (1675-76), named for Nathaniel Bacon Jr., was also significant. Bacon, aiming to settle disputes between some of the colonists and the Doeg Indian tribe, led a group of frontiersmen in raids against local Indian villages. Anxious to calm the situation and to preserve regulated trade with the Indians, Governor Berkeley ordered Bacon to stop the raids, but Bacon refused. Berkeley eventually defeated the rebel forces, but Bacon's uprising against a governor who served as the English king's proxy was a forerunner of the American Revolutionary War 100 years later.

Just as Virginia's General Assembly took on a parliamentary profile, so did the general assemblies of the other 12 colonies that would eventually join Virginia in forming the United States of America. "You can say that the [Virginia] General Assembly is one of the 13 models" for the Continental Congress that served as governing body for the colonies, "and even for the Congress we have today," says Billings.

The Founding Fathers of the United States—men such as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson—served in their states' general assemblies and brought a wealth of legislative experience to their roles as progenitors of a new nation, Billings notes.

"But Virginia is the place where it starts. And much of what the United States has been about" revolves around the question of "who and what is an American; that conversation started in Jamestown, and continues to this day with our debate on immigration," he says. That debate "is messy, it's raucous, at times it's violent and ugly, but it never ceases."

Jamestown can even be linked, "in a very general sense," to the emergence of new democracies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, says Billings. The impulse toward representative government that now prevails in much of the world "is part of that long-term tradition" that Jamestown symbolizes, he adds.

Kevin Kelly, a historian at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, says that when 17th-century legislators met in Jamestown, "they were beginning to tailor their laws to fit circumstances that were peculiar to colonial life."

Unfortunately, one of those circumstances was slavery, a particularly tragic and troublesome aspect of Virginia's patrimony, says Kelly. The General Assembly's attempts to grapple with racial matters were constrained by many landowners' dependence on a system of forced servitude.

By the 18th century, the lower chamber of the Assembly "became the dominant chamber," since the burgesses far outnumbered the governor's advisory council, says Kelly. Members of today's U.S. House of Representatives—the lower chamber of the U.S. Congress—outnumber the members of the U.S. Senate, or upper chamber, by 435 to 100. Power is now evenly shared between the two, however.

Asked whether the Jamestown venture can be viewed as a precursor to the growing global trend toward democratic governance, Kelly agrees that nascent democracies around the world do owe a debt to Jamestown, though indirectly. Jamestown was instrumental "in the development of our [American] kind of self-governance," he says. "And the spread of democracy is evident not only in the growing number of representative governments, but in the fact that most countries now want to be perceived as democratic, since there is a stigma attached to undemocratic regimes. This acts as a pressure in favor of reforms."

Historians will doubtless continue to examine the legacy of the Jamestown settlement, in all its complexity and ambiguity. But perhaps Jamestown's (and Virginia's) place in U.S. history can best be summed up in the words of a 1907 Virginia guidebook, which cites Jamestown as "the sire of Virginia, and Virginia the mother of this great Republic."

http://www.jamestown2007.org/

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Bacon's Rebellion in 1675-76 against a governor appointed by the far-away English king was a forerunner of the Revolutionary War 100 years later.

Captain John Smith trading with the Powhatan Indians. The colonists had to earn money or lose their support from the British crown. At first most spent their time looking for gold, and when starvation loomed, Smith urged them to begin farming.

Dr. Lawrence Bohun arrived in June 1610 and experimented with using native plants, herbs, extracts and minerals, seeking remedies for Old World and New World diseases.

Tobacco seeds from the West Indies grew well in the Virginia soil and this is still an important cash crop for the state.